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ON RE-THINKING LIBERAL EDUCATION

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By HARRY D. GIDEONSE

IN THE RISING tide of vocationalism—and of sheer numbers—the defense of liberal education has been conducted as if it were merely another of the vested interests struggling to preserve its prerogatives and perquisites in the colleges as the traditional home of lost causes. Ivy League college presidents address their alumni, and a cheering, gregarious spirit of self-approval is generated. The principals of “independent schools” meet, and congratulate themselves they are not as other men. Esoteric books are written about the “spirit” of liberal education—and even the average college professor in the humanities fails to recognize his daily practice in their eloquent chapters about the “basic values of free society” and the “capacity for discriminating perception,” while teachers of freshman composition and mathematics search in vain for even an awareness of the recurring problem of each year’s new invasion by lovable but illiterate barbarians who have to be taught the elements of grammar and arithmetic.

Meanwhile, enrollments in the humanities—and more recently the social sciences—continue to fall while we preach sermons to the converted, or splinter our dwindling ranks by philosophical civil wars between “rationalists,” “neohumanists,” and “instrumentalists.” At the same time, the shrinking resources of private educational institutions and their superior talent for public relations have led to the temptation of identifying private and liberal education in the face of the fact that some of our strongest programs of liberal education are today conducted under public auspices. A similar confusion has been created between mass education and general education which obscures the fact that some of the most vital programs re-establishing the essential goals of liberal education are today conducted under the label of general education.

Meanwhile, a tidal wave of increasing enrollment is rolling along through the elementary schools, and within a decade all of the country’s colleges will be swamped with huge increases in the number of applicants for admission. There are no corresponding increases in

graduate enrollments holding out the promise of a new supply of college teachers to match the increasing undergraduate enrollment. There are no indications of improved financial or professional incentives to induce such increases in graduate enrollment. We are clearly drifting into predictable chaos and critical dilution of standards from which only a miracle can be expected to preserve or to recover a qualitatively strong pattern of intellectual achievement.

There are no miracles in sight. There are, however, a number of green shoots on the old tree, and I am selecting them for emphasis because they hold out the promise of "a tide in the affairs of men," which, if we "take the current when it serves," may afford us a new and perhaps final opportunity to argue the case for an education broad and historical in perspective that may be the condition without which free society will be incapable of survival.

There has recently been an abundance of new evidence that a case for liberal education is being prepared in the citadels of its traditional vocationalist adversaries or competitors. *Fortune* Magazine of April 1953, in an editorial entitled "Should a Businessman Be Educated?" raised the basic question whether "business itself" is not "largely to blame" for its current experience that "overspecialization is robbing business of potential top-management material." Business—the editorial went on to say—can create its own "specialists" after it hires them, but "what they need and can't create is men with a decent general education." The editors went on to discuss some statistics they had collected about current trends. Out of 227,029 men who got their first degrees from 1,306 colleges last year, "less than a third took courses that by any stretch of the definition made them products of a general education," and the percentage of liberal-arts-basic-science majors declined from 43 in 1940 to 35.7 for the class of 1952. The editors also quoted some of the statements of leading management personalities, including that of Irving Olds that "the most difficult problems American enterprise faces today are neither scientific nor technical, but lie chiefly in the realm of what is embraced in a liberal-arts education." Shouldn't the "home office" be sending some changed instructions to the recruiting officers who visit the campus to interview the graduating seniors?

Similar sentiments are expressed by other business leaders, such as,

for instance, Clarence B. Randall, who, in his fresh and cogent "survey of the intangibles which command one American's loyalty" entitled *Freedom's Faith*, says:

The weakness of technical education as a preparation for a business career . . . when it is not balanced by participation in liberal disciplines, is that it leaves in the mind of the student the impression that all problems are quantitative, and that a solution will appear as soon as all the facts have been collected and the correct mathematical formula evolved. Would life were that simple! Unhappily, the mysteries of human behavior from which come our most complex modern problems do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis, and there is no mental slide rule which can be distributed as a substitute for straight thinking.¹

The new search by business, and by government, for talent that has developed—in the contemporary personnel jargon—a potential capacity as a "generalist" is matched by the new Air Force ROTC curriculum, where the very title stresses its "generalized" character which on further scrutiny turns out to be a "liberal arts" emphasis, rather than—as the ROTC literature explicitly states—a premature vocational preparation for "military specialties." A recent statement on pre-legal education published as a Statement of Policy by the Association of American Law Schools emphatically endorses a renewed stress on liberal education, and this fall the thorough report by A. E. Severinghaus, Harry J. Carman, and William E. Cadbury on *Preparation for Medical Education in the Liberal Arts College* has once again made the dependence of high-grade medical achievement upon a solid general education, "with more attention to the human and social aspects," one of its principal recommendations.² Those of us who read such literature as part of our professional chores know that the mere publication of "reports" does not necessarily change the practices even of the authors of such documents, but there is no question that such recommendations strengthen the position of the liberal arts colleges in their approach to the professional schools. Even in teacher education, there is encouraging evidence of a return to liberal education from the methodological sterilities of a predominantly "teachers college"

¹ Randall, *Freedom's Faith* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1953), pp. 90–91.

² Severinghaus, Carman, and Cadbury, *Preparation for Medical Education in the Liberal Arts College* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1953).

orientation, and experience here ranges—quite contrary to the stereotypes of the scandal-mongering “best sellers”—all the way from the Ford Fund projects to a completely reorganized teacher education program at Brooklyn College, which is essentially a vocational inlay in a substantially “liberal” education.

With the appearance of this new evidence of appreciation for the contribution of general education in the achievement of vocational objectives, the moment seemed to be opportune for the initiative of the College English Association in organizing, under the creative leadership of its executive secretary, Professor Maxwell H. Goldberg, an institute at the Corning Glass Center from October 15 to 17, 1953, with the announced general theme “Business and the Liberal Arts: An Exchange.” As the guests of Corning Glass Works and Steuben Glass, Inc., an industry that combines esthetic elements with the most advanced chemistry and technology in the manufacture of glass, a group of leading teachers of English, chairmen of English departments in colleges throughout the United States, a few college administrative officers, and a strong sample of top-drawer American business leadership met to explore some of the problems in which an awareness of a joint interest is now developing.

Since the purpose of the conference was to clarify the understanding of both the college and the business representatives of the nature of this joint concern, it was unavoidably a limited group in which there might be some hope for a fruitful discussion. My participation in the meetings convinced me, however, that the nature of these discussions is charged with the broadest possible interest to American education as a whole, and I am therefore devoting this address to some of my personal impressions, and to the suggestions which they led me to make to the officers of the College English Association. These impressions are, of course, wholly my own, and it is my personal responsibility if I take this opportunity before a leading professional audience to broaden the area of participation in the development of a new emphasis in presenting our general concern.

Perhaps I should first identify the authors of this initiative for this audience. The College English Association is primarily a group of some two thousand teachers of undergraduate courses in English. Negatively, I think it is fair to say that they are to be distinguished

from the graduate professors because their primary interest is in the improvement of college teaching and not in what is euphemistically described as "research and publication." Positively, they are interested in the teaching of literature as a "humanity," and they have accepted more responsibility than most professional groups of this type for the interpretation of their professional aims to a larger public. The Executive Secretary of the College English Association formulated that concern rather succinctly in an article in *The CEA Critic* for November 1952, in which he said:

People say the swelling demographic tide will resolve our crisis. Perhaps that of *employment*. I doubt if it will resolve the crisis involving the continuation of our humanistic discipline itself, at least as we have traditionally known it. That crisis is far deeper. The crux is this: *without letting go of our long-cherished humanistic ideals and regimen, can we so modify them that, maintaining their integrity, they will become freshly, essentially relevant to our radically altered civilization?*³

The concern about interpretation appears clearly in the final point of a summary program for the College English Association which reads as follows:

A free society supports us, and we must enjoy its confidence. We owe it our best professional efforts and advice. It must know what we are doing, why we are doing it, and why we feel our work is advantageous to our students and our times.

But, like a lawyer's clients or a doctor's patients, society will judge our success largely by its own satisfaction. This is healthy and stimulating.

We must be sure our society understands us, but we must be sure we understand our society.

The discussion at Corning made it quite clear that there is a wide area of joint concern about shared problems between business leadership of the type that was represented at the conference and educators who think of the liberal arts tradition in a living and creative fashion. Discussion helped to clarify the nature of this joint concern, and in fact much of this clarification really resulted from the translation of the language in which each group habitually expressed itself into the

³ Maxwell H. Goldberg, "Cooperation and Noblesse Oblige," *CEA Critic*, xiv (November, 1952), 5.

vocabulary and concepts of the other. Words have a way of getting stale and shopworn, so that like a worn-out coin they need to be sent back to the mint, and the conference at Corning was characterized by its reminting of the verbal currency.

It is clear that when business complains about the absence of potential skill as a "generalist," it is concerned with the absence of intellectual qualities which liberal education has typically staked out for itself as its own special domain. We usually describe these as perspective, widened horizons, analytical ability, enlarged opportunities for comparison, or—if you please—vicarious experience, which is really another way of getting at perspective and horizon. This—if we can learn one another's language—is potential skill as a generalist. Civilized beings are those who, as Whitehead put it in his *Modes of Thought*, survey the world with some large generality of understanding.⁴

There seemed to be general agreement at the conference that diminishing returns had set in as far as technical or vocational specialization was concerned. The fact was cited that a survey of seventy-six corporations revealed that lack of specific skills accounted for only a shade over 10 percent of the discharges in industry while character traits accounted for almost 90 percent. Character traits also represented the factors preventing promotion in over three times as many cases as did a lack of specific skills. Albert L. Nickerson, vice-president of Socony-Vacuum Oil Co., Inc., gave an address in which he said:

A company hires the whole man and can never fully isolate any one aspect of him; we naturally look closely for poise, self-confidence, tact, capacity for leadership, judgment, and the ability to express himself. . . . We need people with convictions reasonably and deeply held, the sane judgments which come from emotional stability and the imaginative comprehension which comes from understanding the whole condition of man.⁵

⁴ For an excellent contemporary statement of the goals of liberal education, see *General Education in School and College* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 20; and Theodore M. Greene, *Liberal Education Reconsidered* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953). See also the report on liberal education by a committee of the Association of American Colleges in the *Association of American Colleges Bulletin*, XXIX (May 1943), 269-99.

⁵ Many of the formal addresses delivered at the Corning Institute were reprinted in a special issue of the *Saturday Review*, Nov. 21, 1953.

William H. Whyte, Jr., put it even more sharply in his address: "The technician . . . is fit only to be a lackey, not a leader. He can't conjure, he can't speculate, he can't dream."

A similar emphasis can be found in Randall's *Freedom's Faith*, where after a vigorous discussion and defense of academic freedom—including the businessman's right "to participate in that freedom" if he thinks the professor "is plain dippy"—we find a call for "purposeful thinking" rooted in "a strong sense of immediacy and urgency" that will not be limited to the development of "intellectual agility." Mr. Randall goes on to say:

Universities must teach students not only to think, but to feel: They must deal not only with the mind but with the heart. The disciplined brain becomes a dangerous tool indeed if coupled with undisciplined emotions, and until we bring clarity and control into that dark area of human behavior we shall have no sound hope for the future. The leaders we seek for the next generation are those who will be as sure in their handling of the emotional storms that will blow about them as they are clear in their thinking.⁶

The discussions also made it clear that there is broad concern about some of the human by-products of an exclusive business concern with economic productivity. There was agreement with a recent statement of an efficiency engineer that there was a new form of waste in excessive preoccupation with economic efficiency. Intelligent adjustment to change calls for experience in the exercise of choice. A large corporation—we were told—must have an organization that permits great decentralization of authority and responsibility for the reason that if it does not decentralize, it will tend to *overcentralize*. If there is no choice or diversity of patterns, management becomes restricted in the exercise of its judgment and the organization becomes inflexible and bureaucratically rigid while it loses its capacity for survival, which is rooted in an intelligent adjustment to the certain requirements of change. This was sometimes formulated as the need for "distributing the responsibility for making decisions."

There was also a good deal of emphasis on profits as a yardstick of efficiency in the use of resources—and this is a formulation which

⁶ Randall, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

even modern collectivists with their concern about the merging of collective and competitive controls would find more acceptable than the traditional assumption that profits are not in need of a social justification. There was great stress on the nature of man as the residual limiting factor in business judgment—"the job of management is in the most fundamental sense the job of developing people"—and there was frequent mention of the "community development" problems in industrial location, the social and political by-products of migration, such as the human relations and interracial problems involved in the Puerto Rican and Southern Negro movement into our large cities.

Throughout these meetings there was an abiding concern with the future of business enterprise, and with its growth and development in the light of domestic and international political experience. Perhaps this could be formulated in one summarizing question: What is the general climate of ideas in which free enterprise can continue to function effectively? And isn't this a question of joint concern since the associational freedoms, which in De Toqueville's classical formulation are the core of a free society, depend for their support on the creation of income that is not politically and bureaucratically controlled?

It is clear that these discussions—conducted sometimes in stereotyped language on either side and sometimes in a mutual effort to translate the clichés of either side of the argument into the stale and worn phrases of the other—helped to create a new awareness of common objectives. There is sometimes a fatal disconnection between formal language and life—here in the fullness of time, discussion was restoring a cutting edge to language which had become barren because it no longer seemed relevant to our own experience.

The classical definition of a free society as a society characterized by the presence of responsible choice, the classical liberal insistence upon dispersed controls and the separation of powers, and even Acton's "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely"—all these were emerging as new insights growing out of industrial experience and awakening a new interest in the declared and traditional objectives of liberal education. Could there be anything but cheer to a humanist in this new interest in the nature and the whole condition of man, since the study of literature is clearly the most effective method

known to human culture of acquiring vicarious experience concerning the nature of man? Here clearly an acre was ploughed up that holds out rich promise of rewarding crops in the future, if the conversation could be broadened with imagination, with tact, and with persistence. It would of necessity be an empirical process in which we would have to hold purposefully close to actual experience, and it would be fatal to resort too early to preconceived and dogmatic formulations, but there was clearly the promise that a new and vital restatement of liberal education might emerge from the rediscovery of its essential characteristics in the baffling frustrations of contemporary experience. If the process had a confused and opaque quality, it also had a suggestive and earthy resemblance to some of the richest chapters in American intellectual history. Here, too, a shared process of clarifying the formulation of the questions we address to our shared experience may bring results only if we ruthlessly purge ourselves—on either side—of vulgar vested interests, either in a material form or in preconceived verbal formulations.

We have obviously come a long way from the time when the American business community could almost unanimously cheer the insight and the statesmanship of Yale's William Graham Sumner, who asked himself in 1883 the question: What do the social classes owe to each other?, and answered in book length: Nothing. Today the human measure is applied and, although the name was not used, there would be a better understanding of a Brandeis who used to irritate both the liberals and the conservatives of his time by his refusal to accept the popular myths of Big Government or Big Business while he insisted that the correct test of any social system or economic proposal was the type of man it tended to produce. The development of the individual is "both a necessary means *and the end sought*"—Brandeis told a correspondent—and since our society "substitutes self-restraint for external restraint . . . the great developer is responsibility. Our objective is *the making of men and women* who shall be free, self-respecting members of a democracy—and who shall be worthy of respect."⁷

This is, of course, classical American doctrine, frequently expressed

⁷ *The Curse of Bigness*, Miscellaneous Papers of Justice Brandeis, ed. O. K. Fraenkel (New York: Viking Press, 1935), p. 270.

by Abraham Lincoln, who used the word "responsibility" as often as the word "liberty," or by Emerson, who spoke of the true test of civilization as "not the census, nor the size of cities, nor the crops,—no, but the kind of man the country turns out."⁸

All of this is music to the ears of the humanist, but before we indulge ourselves in smug complacency, we might well direct some questions at our own practice as contrasted with our preachments. There is a danger that we might overlook the plight of the humanities in our present concern with the plight of vocational education or of business leadership. It is pleasing, and deeply encouraging, to see the evidence of a new awareness of the vital necessity to a free and productive society of a dynamic program of liberal education. Also—if I may express it somewhat perversely—it was heartening to a seasoned administrator, who has a long academic record of participation as a teacher in the development of such programs as Columbia's Contemporary Civilization course and the initial College program of the University of Chicago, to share in a venture which included so many teachers of the humanities who consider themselves "humanists." But, and it is a very large "but," do we ourselves *live* by the values we so frequently *preach*? And if we are to take advantage of the opportunities that may be offered by the reorientation of others, is it not urgently important to reconsider our own position?

Are we in fact teaching the humanities, and the social sciences, in a humanistic spirit? What light do the humanities—honestly now and in the family circle—throw on such problems as urban migration, community development, and the responsibility of free men? What light do our courses and programs—not as they should be taught but as they *are* taught—throw upon the clarification of human value judgments? Haven't I recently read in an *Atlantic Monthly* article by one of our leading university "humanists" that "values" is a "vogue word," which English teachers should instruct us to avoid because it "almost always means nothing but temporary vacancy of mind"?⁹ And isn't "detachment from value judgments" one of the

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Civilization," *Society and Solitude* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1892), p. 34.

⁹ Jacques Barzun, "English as She's Not Taught," *The Atlantic Monthly*, CXCII (December 1953), 29.

most fashionable borrowings from the natural sciences in a good deal of our "humanistic scholarship"? Can you "clarify" value judgments—and the inevitable tension or polarity between them—by teaching your students that true scholarship calls for eliminating them? If you dehydrate the experience of the human race by eliminating or underemphasizing the irrational, the tragic, and the evil elements in the human situation because their definition is a "value judgment"—and does not "lend itself to measurement"—do you not end up with a collection of empty verbal shells unrelated to human experience? How can you cope with the modern heresy that maturity and adjustment can be found in "security" if humanists and students of human society do not insist that a realistic view of the nature of man is the basis of all the common insights of the moral and literary tradition of free society, and that the only maturity that is compatible with the responsibilities of a free society is a man's ability to cope with unavoidable insecurities within himself?¹⁰

Do we really develop character traits? How and where? Or do we just in a simple way *assume* that we do so—as an unplanned by-product of activities designed to achieve something else? Just exactly where and how do present humanities courses sharpen perception, discipline emotion, and help to clarify and balance values? And is it not rather probable that we might improve the quality of our marksmanship in attaining these noble objectives if we asked some searching questions about the location of our target and the adequacy of our weapons?

Is it not in fact true that a very large number of our teachers in the humanities or the social studies have no reasoned general conception of the liberal education in which they merely have a vocational vested interest in the narrowest possible sense of the term? Can they specify the particular value of a liberal education as distinguished from other types of education? Or do they often simply mean that they prefer their own vocational routine to that of others? Or—only a bit more broadly—do they mean that they prefer the traditional collection of disconnected subjects rather than some new one?

¹⁰ For a more elaborate statement of the political and historical background, see my paper on "Political Education" given before this same group at its November 1951 meeting and printed in *Education in a Period of National Preparedness* (Washington: American Council on Education, 1952).

Or is it rather true, as Professor K. J. Ducasse has recently said in an excellent article on the role of philosophy, that "college teachers commonly have only vague answers if any" to such questions as: What do the traditional components of a liberal education have in common? What specific role do particular subjects play in a liberal education? How relatively important or unimportant may be the role of one subject as compared with that of another? And are there reasoned priorities in the claims for inclusion between new and old subjects that are intellectually more respectable than the number of votes cast in a faculty, which may simply reflect the status quo rather than a reasoned view of the type of education the college should be giving in contrast with the program that is in fact in operation?¹¹

There is likely to be warm response—and there was at Corning—to an eloquent plea that the humanities contribute to vicarious experience and to "the full awareness of all that it means to be a Man," but before we righteously gloat at the current disarray of our adversaries, we might well ask ourselves just how the taxonomic and recondite erudition that is so often camouflaged as "humanistic scholarship" contributes to the achievement of these aims? Do we in fact teach the humanities in a humanistic spirit? How often do we merely teach techniques, or grind the life out of literature between the millstones of historic "scholarship" and academic Philistinism? Or teach *Hamlet* by the "card index method"—as I discovered recently in an excellent academic high school? How often do we successfully teach our students the essentially humanistic distinction between privacy and loneliness? Why did the solitude of Abraham Lincoln's youth lead to an outcome that differs so sharply from the "peer group psychology" of the "lonely crowd"? Do our humanistic and social studies programs have any bearing on the rising tide of "other directedness" and "peer group psychology" reported by David Riesman? What do we contribute to the "sources of responsibility," including the moral and religious development of our students? Is not moral education—as Whitehead insisted—impossible apart from the habitual vision of greatness? What relation does the habitual vision of greatness have to our present instructional materials or methods?

¹¹ Ducasse, "A 'Terminal' Course in Philosophy," *Journal of Higher Education*, XXIV (November 1953), pp. 403 ff.

These questions are not new to the members of the College English Association for it has been an awareness of these weaknesses in humanistic education that has characterized their individual and corporate activity. But they are real questions—and they must be faced before we can expect to have the present “moral belly-ache” about the educational needs of a free society result in significant new support for liberal education.

During the current year Columbia University is celebrating its two-hundredth birthday, and it has taken the occasion to initiate a worldwide discussion of the “right to knowledge.” Does the chosen theme—“Man’s right to knowledge and the free use thereof”—state the core of free society’s intellectual problem? Would it not focus more directly upon the real difficulty of our time if the theme had been formulated to read: “Man’s right to knowledge and the *responsible* use thereof,” thereby emphasizing the supreme intellectual obligation of clarifying the *sources of responsibility* in a free society? And isn’t the real problem emphasized by omission rather than by explicit statement when Columbia University opens its program for the ambitious convocations with the citation from the Gospel according to John (8:32): “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,” thus following the contemporary liberal tradition by dropping the opening words of Jesus’ statement, which reads in full: “*If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*”? Even if we allow for subsequent explanatory statements that “the responsibility inherent in the free use of knowledge” was “so obvious” that “its inclusion in words would have been gratuitous,”¹² the question remains wide open whether contemporary academic and non-academic practice, at home and abroad, does not make it crystal clear that the exaltation of rights and the minimizing of responsibilities is precisely the reason why a challenge to free scholarship and to liberal education has arisen in the twentieth-century world. The clarification of the sources of responsibility is the primary challenge to free society in the struggle with its totalitarian adversaries.

The problem of a vital restatement of the role of liberal education is clearly *moral* and *human* in the broadest sense of the terms, and it

¹² Grayson Kirk, “Knowledge: Most Potent of Weapons,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 3, 1954.

calls for restoring the study of the nature of man to a central place. The errors and heresies of our generation of liberals—yes, and of humanists—have in this respect been as subversive of freedom as the worst excesses of “economism” on the part of our conservatives. Our social institutions are deeply rooted in a realistic conception of the nature of man, and just as economic progress depends upon the extent to which the *strongest*, and not merely the highest, forces of human nature can be utilized for the increase of the common good, so our conception of political and intellectual freedom has not been simply “freedom period,” or the right to do as you please, but rather self-control as contrasted with external control.

What shall we say of a recent address by one of our leading liberal humanists based on the thesis that our freedom is endangered today because we have lost our faith in man, and that “faith in freedom rests necessarily upon faith in man”?¹³ Is not this a pernicious confusion of the essential difference between the French Revolution, with its perfectibilist illusions about the nature of man, and the American Revolution, which, in its faith in dispersed controls and the separation of powers, was deeply rooted in a realistic view of the nature of man? Have not such liberals and humanists forgotten Thomas Jefferson’s view, as expressed in the *Kentucky Resolutions*, that “free government is founded in jealousy, *not* in confidence”?¹⁴ Clearly, the new opportunities for a revitalized liberal education will call not only for an awareness of the errors of “presentism” and “vocation-alism,” but also for a critical and persistent view of the philosophical illiteracy and plain historical ignorance that have gradually distorted liberal and humanistic scholarship itself. The challenge to revise the error of our ways is a double-edged sword, and if we are to take full advantage of the present possibility of a turning of the tide, liberal education will have to scrape some of the barnacles off the bottom of its own ship.

After we have placed such reservations in the record, it still remains true that we are apparently in the presence of a changed set

¹³ Archibald MacLeish, “Loyalty and Freedom,” *The American Scholar*, XXII (Autumn 1953), 393–98.

¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, “The Kentucky Resolutions” (November 1798), *The Complete Jefferson*, ed. Saul K. Padover (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, Inc., 1943), p. 133.

of circumstances in which, if the case is presented with integrity and imagination, the whole subject may well be reviewed in a new spirit of objectivity without the usual appearance of a mere conflict between old and new vested interests. It would also be desirable, before we go much further, to widen the group involved in the present conversations among representatives of the colleges, business, and industry. There is plenty of evidence that there is a new group of leadership in American organized labor that is arriving at a comparable interest in the relation of education to the vitality of free institutions. Names like Reuther of the United Automobile Workers and Dubinsky of the International Ladies Garment Workers occur readily to my mind, and it is perhaps not necessary to remind this audience of Will Herberg's influential book on *Judaism and Modern Man*,¹⁵ which was born out of a concern with the moral vacuum created in New York trade union circles when Marxism declined in its appeal as a secular "religion." There is potential strength here for a new initiative in public and in adult education, and it should be brought to play upon the problems that were tackled so fruitfully at Corning.

There are two reasons for thinking that time is not on our side in these matters—one concerning the business leaders and one concerning the academic group. There is considerable evidence that the personnel on the side of industry and business that is now deeply concerned with "horizon" and "breadth" is largely an older group which was itself trained in a wider perspective that helped to create awareness of the educational deficiencies of the oncoming generation. There was deliberate exaggeration in the statement but one of the leaders in this group at Corning spoke of there "being nothing but technicians below the level of the senior vice-presidents." An observer who is aware of the educational trends in technical education during the past generation will not be surprised—clearly another generation may be on the way which is blissfully unaware of its own limitations.

A similar problem exists on the academic side where enrollments, fiscal trends, federal support for defense-related research, and scholarship incentives, have all contributed to a thinning of the humanistic ranks, both quantitatively and qualitatively. At a recent commence-

¹⁵ Will Herberg, *Judaism and Modern Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951).

ment at Brooklyn College, we graduated twenty-three majors in physics, and at the time of graduation twenty-one of them had received some type of scholarship or fellowship assistance for their graduate work, including one student who had earned a C record at Brooklyn College. On the other hand, there was practically no fellowship support for a larger group of majors in philosophy, history, and other humanistic subjects, and this group included many of our highest aptitude students. This has been a national trend, and if the colleges, in the face of declining enrollments in these subjects, are compelled to appoint inadequate manpower in terms of dedication and initial quality, we will soon have a large group on the faculties, endowed with tenure to the ripe age of retirement, who will themselves tend to discourage students of the proper caliber from entering the profession. If present trends continue, there may be a barren age ahead of us—and in a few years it will be difficult to reverse these trends. As things stand, time is of the essence.

There are three channels through which we might promote a widening and deepening interest in the present possibilities for restating our case. If we take the questions which seemed to be common denominators of interest as our theme, I think they would be formulated as follows: What is the general climate of ideas in which free institutions can continue to develop? How can education contribute to the formation of men and women who are fit for the responsibilities of free society? If we could set some competent committees to work on the clarification and implementation of these questions in the field of teacher education, the liberal arts college program, and the graduate program of training college teachers, we would, I think, contribute a desirable note of specificity to the discussion. My own preference would be for a separate committee assignment in each of these cases—and perhaps for several committees with the same assignment. At this stage it might be preferable to aim at a composition of these committees that would reflect a measure of philosophical homogeneity rather than “statesmanlike balance” of opposing views. There is plenty of compromise in the status quo, and discussion in the present stage is more likely to be fruitful if it is nourished by the presentation of reasoned and sharply articulated alternatives.

I would be particularly concerned about the field of graduate in-

struction, in which the vested interests of research and publication have often become a clearly defined hazard to the values of liberal education. There is perhaps no area in American intellectual life in which there is a wider gap between practice and preachment, and graduate schools have a determining influence upon the selection of the next generation of teachers. A properly motivated student may overcome a good many financial hurdles. But if we combine financial hurdles and economic dis-incentives with a training process which sifts out and eliminates the students with a natural aptitude in our direction, we are close to a set of conditions which forecast a complete sterility in a few decades. There are, I know, exceptions to all these generalizations, and it will be precisely the function of such a program of reasoned evaluation to spotlight the growing points that hold out promise for a new vitality in liberal education.

If we compare the usual statement of humanistic values and liberal arts objectives with the actual operation of our graduate schools, or if we compare the generalized statement of graduate school aims with the criteria that are used in the selection of men for advancement or in the support of research, it would not be unfair to paraphrase an old historic slogan to read, "Millions for research and not a cent for understanding." From 60 to 80 percent of graduate school students are destined to be members of liberal arts college faculties. What would we say about a medical or engineering faculty which deliberately sacrificed the future professional needs of three-fourths of its students to the laissez-faire vested interests of the individual members of its own faculty? Or, if it is argued that these professional needs are most effectively served by deliberately ignoring them, is it not a rather obvious intellectual responsibility to document such a startling thesis in a responsible and scholarly fashion?

There is one additional major concern that developed in my mind as I participated in the Corning program, and since it is confirmed by experience throughout the country, I think it may deserve some mention here. For rather obvious reasons, it is difficult today for college administrators to discuss their problems without mention of budgetary aspects. Equally clearly, a search for new support for the idea of liberal education is partly and quite legitimately motivated by the need for new sources of financial aid. It is an error, however,

to present the problem of preserving liberal education as if it were a challenge to industry to preserve privately supported higher education. In the first place, *if* we really make our case for the identity of the interests of liberal education and of free society, the support will tend to take care of itself. And in the second place—and this is important to a municipal college president—there is *no evidence* whatsoever that liberal education at present is more effectively or more frequently pursued under private than under public auspices.

More than 50 percent of America's undergraduates today are enrolled in public colleges. If we are to be realistic in our evaluation of present fiscal and economic trends, we shall probably agree that the figure is not likely to decline. I do not say this to belittle the importance of private education. I regard its survival as crucially important from the standpoint of the quality and the diversity of the whole of American society. But it would be a fatal error to assume that mass education and public education, or that vocational education and public education, or that liberal education and private education are synonymous. There is as much diversity in American public education as there is in American private education; and sometimes it is a diversity within the *same* system of public education. New York City's City College in Manhattan has made major adjustments to degree programs in vocational education. Right across the river, Brooklyn College—established and supported by the same City of New York—has rigorously kept its entire undergraduate student body matriculated for the baccalaureate degrees within a pattern of liberal education. This diversity is a matter of deliberate choice, and I think it would be easy to prove that many private institutions have made substantially greater concessions to vocational pressures than a large number of colleges that are publicly supported. It would also be rather easy to prove that the graduates of public liberal-arts-and-science education stand up quite well by national standards. Our graduating class at Brooklyn College of ten years ago earned eighty-one scholarships and fellowships in thirty-seven different graduate and professional schools, while the report for last year shows two hundred and twenty-one scholarships and fellowships in seventy-nine different institutions.

Recently a study by two members of the faculty of Wesleyan

University traced the collegiate origins of the younger generation of American scholars.¹⁶ The yardsticks were national, and in order to equalize the results for six hundred small and large institutions, they were calculated in terms of the number of scholars per thousand recent graduates. This was a study of quality, not quantity. And the yardsticks which were used did not in some respects fully reflect the achievements of our own student body. Under these circumstances, it would be reasonable to expect that some of the country's excellent small private colleges would be high up in the final list of the top fifty colleges—and they were. But—and it is a “but” that is directly relevant to my present argument—when they were measured by these national yardsticks, Queens College and Brooklyn College were twelfth and thirtieth, respectively, in the final list of the country's leading fifty institutions, and if we remember the size of these institutions, these two municipal colleges accounted for as many scholars as sixteen other institutions in this top list of fifty. Brooklyn College was listed immediately following Amherst and Williams. If we throw the figures for the four New York municipal colleges together—which would be justifiable in a study that classified the University of California as one unit—and if we look at the *total* number of scholars (and not at the statistical index measuring the number of scholars per thousand graduates), we find the College of the City of New York in its corporate capacity leading the country as a source of the nation's new scholars and scientists, with Harvard in second and the University of California in third place (the total figures are 292, 288, and 272, respectively).

I cite these figures in some detail because I am familiar with them. A study of other public institutions would probably lead to similar conclusions. The data certainly prove that public education today is a major factor in the country's qualitative achievement in liberal education. Liberal education is concerned with a quality product—and a quality product is just as costly in public as it is in private education. Quality or excellence is not only a classical liberal objective, but in the quantitative thinking that dominates contemporary world politics—in which Americans are a minority—quality may well be the determining factor in national survival. Since more than half

¹⁶ Robert H. Knapp and Joseph J. Greenbaum, *The Younger American Scholar: His Collegiate Origins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

of our human educational resources on the college level are engaged in public higher education, it is crucial to remember that the financial pressures bearing on public education are just as heavy as those that are brought to bear on private education. Recent New York State data show an annual cost per student for all colleges in the state that averages around \$1,000. But the figures for the New York municipal colleges average \$668 per student, with Brooklyn College at the bottom of the scale, averaging \$587 per student. I am not proud of these figures—they measure in a rough way the acute pressure on public education of tendencies that are too frequently discussed as if they were exclusively a feature of the country's private colleges.

The protection of the quality of liberal education is emphatically a matter of joint interest to public as well as private education, and it is a serious error in professional judgment to permit the development of a false impression in this regard. But—I repeat—it is an even more serious mistake to give the discussion of budgetary factors priority over the discussion of the primary interest of the national community as a whole in the preservation of an educational structure that aims first of all at the development of men and women fit for the responsibilities of free society. If we establish our case convincingly for the latter, the support will take care of itself. And in any case, at any given level of financial support, there are qualitative improvements open to creative and courageous leadership if we continue to ask ourselves clearly and persistently: How do we rate the priorities of the educational needs we now serve and those we are at present unable to meet, and is the lowest need now met more urgent than the highest need not met?

If the "unexamined life" is the basic sin, according to the classical humanist and Socratic position, then the Corning conference has some virtue to its credit. Clearly the discussion is back to fundamentals, and to their persistent testing by discussion.

We are concerned with the establishment of cultural yardsticks which will help us to assign valid priorities in the commitment of our educational and intellectual energies. We are asking a classical liberal and American question when we inquire into the nature of the man who can be trusted with freedom and who will be fit for the responsibilities of a free society.

We are not concerned with the elaboration of a technique of turning out smoothly polished spare parts for the industrial machine, or of a method of expressing the values of the humanistic tradition in words that will appeal to the business community or to reactionary politicians who do not even understand the nature of the free society they are presumably concerned to defend. Neither are we concerned with the preservation of the vested interests of industry or academy. We are not denying the validity of vocational or technical education for competence in the most specialized fields for employment which our current economic system holds out to the huge enrollment in higher education—although we would like to emphasize rather than to blur the distinction in objectives of these proliferating programs—and we are certainly not arguing that liberal education as it is, or as it should be, can “train” students for business. “Utility,” as Professor John Ciardi pointed out at Corning, “is not a problem of the liberal arts,” and “business would be in a bad way indeed” if it were to depend on liberal education to supply it.¹⁷ We are concerned with the contribution liberal education can and should make to the development of responsible and responsive personality, and this is in many ways the most crucial problem of free society today.

We are in a very real sense engaged in a *conservative* quest, and in the present climate of opinion I use the controversial word deliberately because it expresses my meaning. If we choose to be more tactful toward prevailing stereotypes, we might say that we are concerned with establishing the conditions of an “enduring individualism.” Even this statement of the goal is deeply conservative—not in the sense of preserving the status quo, which is rejected for varying reasons by all concerned, but in the sense that we are concerned about preserving or re-establishing the conditions in which a free society can continue to exist, that is to say, a society that will be characterized by the presence of responsible choice.

The times are ripe for a bold and imaginative leadership. There are new beginnings around us everywhere. They abound in recent literature. They are evident in the concerns of the not-so-silent younger generation, which has found sterility and frustration in the educational drift as well as in the “advanced” ideas of the recent past. If we are to

¹⁷ *The Saturday Review*, Nov. 21, 1953, p. 43.

benefit from the lesson of the Hutchins' Great Books episode, which began in a similar burst of enthusiasm for revitalizing liberal education, we might fruitfully focus on the fatal insistence of its promoters that it was "irrelevant" that "the students might not like it,"¹⁸ since "young men have not lived long enough to know why temperance and wisdom are good."¹⁹ The question to which we should seek an answer is precisely the student's inquiry cited by Chancellor T. R. McConnell of the University of Buffalo in an able survey of the meaning of general education: "Why is it that our courses in philosophy never seem to have anything to do with things *that matter to us?*"²⁰

② The present opportunity lies precisely in the changed motivation which we would overlook at our peril. The question is not: How can we return to a *past* pattern of liberal education? The present challenge is rather: How can we make liberal education indigenous by re-thinking its moral and intellectual content so that it will be relevant to the needs of free society in America today?

There is little danger today, however, of the ivory tower complacency of twenty years ago. There is a general awareness that we must take advantage of a running tide if our ships are not to be beached. There is even a danger that, in our present concern with the weakness of technical and vocational education, we may find so much easy consent to our general thesis that a smug tendency may develop to overlook the size of the group that is comfortably at ease with the fleshpots provided by the astounding material productivity of our economic system in the present phase of its development without realizing that the fleshpots themselves—as well as our effectiveness in the technology of national defense—are derived from and deeply dependent upon the freedom of science which developed as a by-product of traditional liberal education.

Let us not forget the danger, characteristic of educational initiatives of a humanist inspiration, that the early converts to a new insight

¹⁸ Robert M. Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in a Democracy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 86.

¹⁹ Mark Van Doren, *Liberal Education* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1943), p. 60.

²⁰ T. R. McConnell, "General Education, an Analysis," Part I of the *Fifty-First Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 3.

might easily become a closed community rich in mutual admiration for its own wisdom and perspective. I therefore close with a very Christian prayer, pronounced some years ago by a Protestant bishop at a clerical conference in Canada which had not been too responsive to the bishop's efforts to lift the discussion beyond the vested interests of the participants.

When the bishop was asked to offer the final prayer, he said: "May the Lord grant that we justify the esteem in which we hold ourselves. Amen."

